



Pattern of Female Characterization in Girish Karnad's *The Fire and the Rain* and *Naga-Mandala*

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Abstract— Playwright Girish Karnad is highly respected in India for his depictions of characters navigating the complexities of Indian society. Even though Karnad's writings have received a lot of scholarly attention, the complex way in which he portrays female characters in his works is still a fascinating but little-studied subject. This study examines the various ways in which women are portrayed in Karnad's selected plays. The article identifies reoccurring patterns, and representations of characters that define Karnad's depiction of female figures through close textual analysis of *The Fire and the Rain* and *Naga-Mandala*.

Keywords— Girish Karnad, *The Fire and the Rain*, *Naga-Mandala*, Representation of Women, Gender and Indian Society.



Introduction

The topic of women has gained significant attention in post-colonial literature, both in India and in Western nations, as a result of various movements advocating for women's emancipation from the oppressive male dominance and patriarchal culture. Indian English writers have sought to address this imbalance by foregrounding women's stories and perspectives, thereby enriching the literary landscape and providing a platform for women's voices to be heard. Girish Karnad (1938–2019) was a prominent figure in Indian literature, theater, cinema, and public intellectual life. Girish Karnad's work exhibits elements of feminism, though he might not be strictly categorized as a feminist writer in the conventional sense. While his primary focus was not solely on feminist issues, Karnad's exploration of women's experiences, agency, and challenges within the context of Indian society demonstrates sensitivity to feminist themes. The article presents how women go through the same problems in life irrespective of their family background and social status. Although they belong to different family background their condition is the same and the treatment they get in the society is also the same. So, their plight forms a similar pattern in their

characterization and the same has been picturized in this article.

Female Characters

Girish Karnad's portrayal of female characters is marked by sensitivity, depth, and a commitment to authenticity. His works offer audiences a glimpse into the diverse and complex lives of women, inviting reflection on issues of gender, power, and identity in Indian society and beyond. Karnad depicts the condition of a typical Indian female in his plays, who is ruled by patriarchal order and bound by tradition, but whose spirit remains unbounded. Karnad, as a humanist, sincerely attempts to give a voice to the silenced majority through his plays. Vishakha, Nittilai in *The Fire and the Rain* and Rani in *Naga-Mandala* represent Karnad's effort to give them a voice

T.D Purakasyastha (2006) writes about the themes of silence in the play *Naga-Mandala* — it is marked by a meaningful engagement with the topos of a silent woman, whose speechlessness, Karnad regards with interest for its subversive potential. It is a landmark because of the way, it challenges the role of drama, basically a verbal artifact as a medium intended to capture the silence of the speechlessness with all its nuances.

Female Characters as Victims of Patriarchal Oppression

The first pattern we get to see in the characterization is that female characters are victims of patriarchal oppression; patriarchal decisions have been imposed on them.

In *The Fire and the Rain* Vishakha a Brahmin girl, is married in a high caste Brahmin family represented by the intellectual and learned men like Raibhya and her husband, Parvasu, who are endowed with spiritual knowledge and supernatural power as her father-in-law exhibits. But their family possesses the traits of patriarchal family system. Vishakha suffers because of male dominance. It is observed that Vishakha was forced to marry Parvasu when she loves Yavakri. This is a very basic principle of orthodox patriarchy that girl's consent is not considered she was unhappy but for the happiness of her father she got married with Parvasu. She says to Yavakri her former lover that,

Yavakri: Your father must have felt relieved that I went away.

Parvasu was a better match. I was only his miserable cousin.

Vishakha: Yes, Father was happy. I was married off to Parvasu.

I did not want to, but that did not matter.
(FAR 16)

After marriage Parvasu promised her that he would keep her happy. She enjoys her marital life. Vishakha feels that her husband accepted her as true wife. But her happiness does not remain long. Parvasu is very ambitious person. When he becomes main Priest of the yajna (a religious rite) without discussing it with Vishakha he decides to join the yajna he leaves his house. He does not think about Vishakha's feelings and emotions. He selfishly used her for his physical pleasure for one year then leaves home for seven years without thinking about her. Vishakha was left alone. He never cared to come to meet her, to know how she is doing.

Before her marriage Vishakha loved Yavakri she wanted to marry him but she could not. In absence of her husband Yavakri comes back in her life. She was very happy after meeting him as she has been alone for a long time, she felt alive after spending time with him. But she later finds out that he only used her. He seduced her because he wanted to take revenge from her father-in-law and her husband. He only used her for his selfish deed. This revelation gave her a shock. So, we see Vishakha has been oppressed by every male in his life, not only her father but her husband, her lover and her father-in-law. They all oppressed her in different ways.

Another oppressed person we see in the play *The Fire and the Rain* is Nittilai. Arvasu and Nittilai who are in their

teens: Arvasu is nineteen years old and Nittilai is just fourteen. Their teenage love is in progress and they are planning to get married. Nittilai belongs to a tribe. And to get married to her Arvasu must face the Elders of Nittilai's tribe. Going by the tribal custom every young man who wants to marry a girl must appear before the Elders first. But here the problem is that Arvasu is a Brahmin and Nittilai is a hunter girl. Their orthodox family will not allow this inter-caste marriage. Arvasu respects his elder brother Parvasu, a rigid Brahmin, but will not sacrifice his love for Nittilai for his sake. He is ready to face the Elders for her. But he cannot reach there in time, so he is refused Nittilai's hand. And Nittilai is forced to marry a man of her tribe. Thus, her dream of spending her life with Arvasu shatters.

Vishakha and Nittilai were not allowed to marry their lovers. If they married, they would have happily lived their lives. It can be said that family life of Vishakha and Nittilai remains tragic due to patriarchal oppression and dominance.

In *Naga-Mandala* Rani is also a victim of patriarchal oppression and child marriage much in vogue in the native culture. Her parents decide to get her married without even asking for her choice thinking that she is incapable of taking her own decision. She got married in her teens when she did not even understand the meaning of marriage. She is married to a person named Appanna, literally means 'any man.' So, it is not just the story of Rani and Appanna but that of any man and woman united in a wed-lock. Marriage is the age-old institution that has sometimes been unfair to women. Women are exploited physically, mentally, emotionally, socially and intellectually.

Appanna is involved in an extra marital relationship and has no interest in his beautiful, obedient, quiescent wife and goes gallivanting, imprisoning his wife at home. This helpless Indian village girl simply stands perplexed; unable even to weep. He gives all his love and care to his concubine and treats his wife like a maid. He comes home to take a bath and eat lunch only. He does not even talk enough with Rani. Rani is left alone in the house, with not even the freedom and courage to express her fear of loneliness. She struggles for words and when she hesitantly says, "Listen (fumbling for words) Listen-I feel frightened alone at night". He retorts, "What is there to be scared of? Just keep to yourself. No one will bother you." (NM 18)

According to Aparna Bhargava Dharwadker's extensive research on the play's composition, "Karnad reimagines the world of Hindu antiquity and constructs a story of passion, loss, and sacrifice within the contexts of Vedic ritual, spiritual discipline (tapasya), social and ethical differences between human agents, and interrelated forms of performance still close to their moments of origin" (xvii). The play's title itself encodes multiple meanings: fire

represents "passion, fury, wrath, jealousy, betrayal, brutality, and death," while rain symbolizes "selflessness, kindness, forgiveness, grace from on high, rebirth, and life itself." (qtd. in Kalaranjini & Krishnaraj 414)

Triangular Relationship – Two Men and a Woman

The next pattern we get to see is that Karnad dealing with his female characters dexterously presents the triangular relationship in most of his plays. Triangulation between two men and a woman comes repeatedly in Karnad's plays while portraying conjugal life. It seems Karnad's female protagonists crave for something other than what fate offers them as their life partner. They are not happy in their married life and they are suffering. Going to their husband's house they lost their identity. They want to feel belonged and after all love and belongingness is a need of human being. This craving gives birth to extra marital relationship.

In the play *The Fire and the Rain*, the female protagonist Vishakha keeps love triangle in her conjugal life, because her male counterpart Parvasu fails to understand her love and emotions. After one year of marriage Parvasu leaves his wife and he goes to perform the Fire Sacrifice for seven years. In his absence, Vishakha is subjected to Raibhya, her father-in-law's jealousy and lust. She feels tormented. Her peace of mind is lost.

In absence of Parvasu, Vishakha's past lover Yavakri approaches her. He reminds her of the love moments of their past. In past they had good time together. She loved him truly and had been happy with him. Though after her marriage all her love and loyalty were towards her husband only but under such difficult circumstances and under the influence of Yavakri, she breaks the rich Indian tradition of pious woman and meets Yavakri. Now she has been alone for a long time so meeting Yavakri for the second time makes very happy. She sits down and readily agrees to listen to him. She does not fear to express her desire to Yavakri. She becomes passionate and says that:

Vishakha: I was so happy this morning. You were so good.

So warm. I wanted to envelop you in everything I could give. (FAR 27)

She narrates to him how she has been left alone by her husband for the last seven years. She frankly confesses that the married life of one year gave her a great joy as her husband plunged her into a kind of bliss. But after getting invitation to become chief priest, he left her and since then she has been suffering in the hermitage 'like a she-devil' (FAR 15)

Nittilai in *The Fire and the Rain* wanted to marry Arvasu and for that Arvasu must present in front of the elders of the

tribe but because of his family issues he could not present at the time of the meeting. So, parents of Nittilai forced her to marry a man of the tribe. And she accepted it as her faith. But when she heard about the news that Arvasu has been badly beaten by the soldiers and there is no one to take of him. She ran away from her husband's house to rescue Arvasu. Her love towards Arvasu is unconditional and undeniable so she could not help herself and ran to help him. Although she denies having a love relationship with him anymore because she values and respects her tribal culture and sanctity of marriage, she also respects her husband so she feels guilty for betraying him.

Rani, the main character in *Naga-Mandala*, is married to Appanna. Their marriage remains unconsumed, as there is no love between the two. Appanna spends nights with his concubine outside, and treats his wife as a maid only. This treatment is like torture for her.

One day, Kurudavva, the friend of Rani's dead mother-in-law, visits her and befriends her. She tells about the story of the 'two pieces of a root' Rani listens to it very attentively. She laughs for the first time after her marriage when Kurudavva narrates how the root given to her by a mendicant helped her in marrying a man and "it took the plague to detach him from her" (NM 34). Perhaps, she has found a ray of hope in Kurudavva's tale. Kurudavva gives the same root to Rani and instructs her to serve it to Appanna. But somehow it is Naga that consumes these magical roots.

Naga started visiting her every night as Appanna. She was very happy when he was with her. Rani never doubts the identity of the man who visits her at night, though she has sufficient proof that he is not actually her husband. But why she should be suspicious when her husband does not love her maybe she prefers to remain ignorant. Whenever there is a doubt about Naga's identity, she makes no effort to confirm it. Thus, we see Rani also in a triangular relationship.

Gupta (1999) says about *Naga-Mandala* —It is remarkable achievement of Karnad's play that he adapts this 'man-oriented' folk tale in such a manner that it becomes the representation of the experience of man and woman in the psychologically transitory phase.

Female Characters as Victims of Emotional and Mental Torture

The third pattern we find is that Female characters in the selected plays of Girish Karnad are victim of emotional and mental torture; they also had to go through physical violence.

In *Naga-Mandala* when Appanna does not see Rani in the house and the dog barks outside, he becomes angry and as

soon as she enters the house, he slaps her "Rani collapses to the floor. He does not look at her again. Just pulls the door shut, locks it from outside and goes away" (NM 17)

Appanna becomes furious when he comes to know of her pregnancy. He maltreats her "Pushes her to the floor and kicks her." He cries: "Aren't you ashamed to admit it, you harlot? I locked you in, and yet you managed to find a lover! Tell me who it is. Who did you go to with your sari off" (NM 33)

In *The Fire and the Rain*, being a father-in-law Raibhya is supposed to take care of Vishakha and give her respect and care. But Vishakha is maltreated by him. When Raibhya gets to know that she met Yavakri, her past lover he grabs her by hair and starts beating her he kicks her. Raibhya's deed is unpardonable. Vishakha is subjected to humiliation when Raibhya uses filthy language for her, forgetting that he is the head of the family, he is supposed to protect her, take care of her and help her but he uses derogatory words, calls her "a buffalo that's been rolling in mud" (FAR 34). He further continues to threaten and rebukes her in the presence of Parvasu her husband: "you whore-you roving whore!" (FAR34). In front of Arvasu he calls her "bitch of your." (FAR 34) No husband can tolerate his wife being abused by his father in such a manner. But Parvasu does not try to stop him. He did not support her; he did not even speak a word.

Raibhya and Arvasu are agencies of patriarchal society that punishes a woman when they break a social law or go against the social or moral code of society. Her only fault was she was also a human being who wanted completeness in her life, she wanted to be loved. She wanted to feel that she is also something to someone; she wanted to have an identity because she was feeling lost and hopeless.

Alienated Women Protagonists

Another pattern that we find is that most of the major women protagonists are alienated persons and lost into the destructive force of existential crises.

Rani is alienated in the house of her husband when he ignores her and she dwells in the imaginary world isolated from the parents and her husband. She dreams like a child, longing for parents and their affection, being carried away by an eagle. She asks having lost the control of sense and of new responsibility "where are you taking me" (NM 7). The eagle replies, "Under the tree your parents wait for you" (NM 7). The dream makes Rani forget the torture that her husband causes, she demands like a child, "Do they! Then please take me to them- immediately. Here I come" (NM 7). Rani is so lost and lonely. There is no one who she could talk with. She finds comfort and solace only in her dreams.

The dejection Rani is subjected to and suffers from and the desperation that she finds into the locked room converts her into a meek and silent persona alienated from family and society that she cannot endure for a long time. She sobs and cries alone in that house without anyone to comfort her and in this way her pent up feelings and emotions find release.

Both Vishakha and Nittilai in *The Fire and the Rain* are alienated beings. Vishakha is left by her husband who joined the Yajna leaving her in the hermitage living alone and reduced to a skeleton. She is already alienated in the hermitage but when Yavakri molests her, her last hope also vanishes and is fumed to take revenge. Her mind has been so tortured that now she does not know which direction she should take and how her mind should rest.

Nittilai is the most alienated person. Neither she can go to her parent's home nor to her husband after fleeing from her husband's house. Being chased by her brother and her husband, she has to find a place in the dark forest to hide from the preying eyes. With Arvasu also she cannot make public appearance. She could not get chance to consume and enjoy the material life she had dreamt in the company of Arvasu.

Female Characters Subjected to Trial and Death

The final pattern that we see is Karnad's females are subjected to trial and death as two modes of punishment in their lives. Indian society and culture have their own discipline and modes of punishment, which do not let any member escape unpunished if they revolt against them. They keep watch and maintain invisible agencies for surveillance, and the individual must behave within the space she occupies. Whenever a woman goes against the moral codes and traditional laws of society, she has to face the consequences.

In *Naga-Mandala* the judgment committee, the village court, headed by the elders revives the traditional Panchayat, highly respected by the members of the society. Each society has its own traditional rules and codes of conduct. Such committees headed by men are the orders framed by patriarchal system of society wherein only male elders, the customs of the rules and regulation of the society, prevail and pass on the verdict whether right or wrong. The crime has conveyed to the village court by Appanna is that Rani has committed adultery. In the light of the complaint the village court asks her to prove her innocence on oath, "holding a red-hot iron in the hand" or by putting "the hand in boiling oil" (NM 36). both the traditional tests are so inhuman in their effects; they do not have an objective procedure to judge the honesty of a person, for both red iron and boiling oil will certainly burn the hands, no matter it is the hand of a criminal or of an innocent man. She takes snake ordeal as instructed by Naga.

Here we are reminded of myth of Sita in Ramayana who also faced fire ordeal without any of her guilt. In the play too, Rani is innocent, although she has committed adultery, it is Naga in the form of her husband Appanna who makes love to her. She thinks that she bears her husband's child and does not suspect Naga's identity till the very end.

In *The Fire and the Rain* Nittilai has to lose her life because she went against the tribal moral code. When she gets to know about the terrible condition of Arvasu, she left her husband and went to take care of Arvasu. In this way she breaks the so-called moral code of society and her tribal community. When Nittilai sees her brother and husband sitting near a fire with grim faces, she gets frightened, thinking that something ominous would happen. Knowing that she will be caught, she plans to hide herself in jungle to save her life.

Nittilai wants to live, live the earthy life to seek pleasure as well as work for the benefit of the people and society. But she has been chased and slaughtered for going against the tribal rules of marriage code. The tribal community is hostile towards woman who goes against community's rule and culture as they try to prevail within the system. She has been persecuted. this patriarchal society does not give right to her to choose with whom she wants to spend her life.

The patterns in the characterization of females in Girish Karnad's works stem from his engagement with Indian culture, mythology, and societal issues, as well as his commitment to creating complex, realistic characters that resonate with universal themes and human experiences.

CONCLUSION

Karnad's works often delve into the complexities of Indian society, where gender roles, traditions, and societal expectations play significant roles. His portrayal of female characters reflects these dynamics, exploring how women navigate and sometimes challenge these constraints. Through these female characters, Girish Karnad skillfully portrays the diverse experiences of women in Indian society, addressing themes such as love, desire, identity, and resilience. Through his female characters, he examines the complexities of womanhood and the societal pressures that shape their lives, offering insights into the human condition from a feminine perspective. These female characters reflect the intersection of identity, encompassing factors such as class, caste, religion, and ethnicity. He acknowledges the diverse experiences and perspectives of women from different social backgrounds, highlighting the intersecting oppressions they may face. The patterns in the characterization of females in Girish Karnad's works stem from his engagement with Indian culture, mythology, and societal issues, as well as his commitment to creating

realistic characters that resonate with universal themes and human experiences.

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